

Name _____
Date _____

Social Studies
Class _____

Christopher Columbus: Fact or Fiction?

Directions: Christopher Columbus is one of the most famous figures in American history. You may think you know a lot about him, but many so-called “facts” about Columbus are not really true. Test your knowledge about Columbus by reading the following statements and labeling each one “fact” or “fiction.”

1. Columbus set out to prove the earth was round. _____
2. Queen Isabella sold the crown jewels to pay for Columbus' voyage. _____
3. The crew of the three ships on the voyage of discovery was made up mainly of criminals and ne'er-do-wells. _____
4. The initial voyage from Spain to the new world was perilous--fraught with bad weather and lack of food. Several sailors died on the way. _____
5. Columbus started on his voyage with three ships, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria, but the Santa Maria never made it back to Spain. _____
6. Columbus was of Italian descent. _____
7. Columbus suffered from syphilis and probably died from it. _____
8. Columbus died a pauper, in chains, in a Spanish prison. _____
9. Columbus is buried in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic. _____
10. Columbus traveled to the southern part of what is now the United States.

11. After finding out the truth, what fact about Columbus surprised you the most? Why?

Answers:

1. **FICTION:** Educated people in Columbus' time knew the earth was round. The argument was over the **SIZE** of the earth. Columbus thought the earth was small enough for him to reach Asia before his food and water ran out. Scientists of the time calculated that the earth was much larger. Interestingly enough, Columbus was wrong. He underestimated the size of the earth by one-fourth. If the Americas hadn't been there, he and his crew would have starved long before reaching Asia.

2. **FICTION:** The queen may have suggested this at some point, but her financial advisers assured her that there were other ways to finance the enterprise. One way was to make the city of Palos pay back a debt to the crown by providing two of the ships. Another way was to get Italian financial backing for part of the expenses. The crown had to put up very little money from the treasury.

3. **FICTION:** The crew was primarily comprised of seasoned sailors from the towns of Palos and Moguer, Spain, thanks to the efforts of the Pinzon brothers. Just in case Columbus might have had trouble attracting a crew, the crown did offer amnesty to criminals. However, only four criminals were on board: one a convicted murderer (he killed a man in a quarrel); the other three, accused of freeing him from prison.

4. **FICTION:** Contrary to popular myth, Columbus's voyage to the New World was smooth-sailing! His ships had food for a full year, and encountered no storms. But a huge hurricane on the return voyage almost destroyed Columbus's tiny fleet!

5. **FACT:** Columbus left Spain with three ships, but returned with only two. The Santa Maria was shipwrecked in 1492 -- on Christmas Day!

6. **UNCLEAR.** Many historians believe Columbus was born in the Italian port city of Genoa -- but others think he was born on the island of Corsica. Columbus was a fervent Catholic who believed God had chosen him for a great destiny -- but his folks may have been "conversos" -- converted Spanish Jews! Other experts believe Columbus's family tree included Vikings.

7. **FICTION:** Columbus suffered in later life from a form of gout--an arthritic condition in his joints caused by the rigors of the sea. His eyesight was also declining. While syphilis was introduced into Europe after 1492, probably by the Indians Columbus brought back to Spain or by the sailors who had contact with them in the new world, Columbus was not infected by it.

8. **FICTION:** Despite the fact that the Spanish crown retracted some of the privileges promised to Columbus, he was a relatively rich man at the time of his death. Although he returned to Spain in chains in 1500 after his third voyage, the King and Queen apologized for the misunderstanding and had them removed. Columbus died quietly at the age of 55 in Valladolid, Spain, on May 20, 1506 in his own apartment attended by family and friends.

9. **FICTION:** There is much controversy surrounding the whereabouts of the remains of Columbus. There are records of the transferal of his remains on different occasions, so that it is possible that parts of his remains are in several locations. The prevailing belief, however, is that his primary burial place is in the Cathedral of Seville, Spain, with some of his bones or ashes in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and some in Genoa, Italy. At one time they were in Cuba.

10. **FICTION:** Columbus never saw North America. His first landfall was in the Bahamas, probably the current San Salvador (Watlings Island), although even this is disputed (Samana Cay, an island 65 miles south of San Salvador is a strong contender). There are proponents for seven other possible island landing sites. The only current U.S. territories either sighted or visited by Columbus are the U.S. Virgin Islands, which Columbus named on his second voyage, and Puerto Rico. While in anchor of St. Croix (USVI) on November 14, 1493, some of Columbus' crew experienced the first hostile encounter with the Indians. Five days later he landed at San Juan Bautista, now Puerto Rico. Later he would visit the northeastern tip of South America and the eastern coast of Central America, but never mainland U.S.A. The fact is that Columbus never admitted that he had discovered a new continent.

Sources:

http://wilstar.com/holidays/columbus_myths.htm,

<http://www.weeklyuniverse.com/columbus.htm>